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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly, entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern and further actions and initiatives

Statement submitted by IFENDU for Women's Development, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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Statement*

1. Ifendu for Women's Development (IFENDU) is a non-governmental organization based in Enugu, Nigeria, in special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council since 2010. IFENDU was founded in 2004 as a follow-up to the pioneering work of a women's congregation which gave women access to the (then exclusive) world of formal education in Nigeria since the 1920s. IFENDU came into existence out of the realization that although many Nigerian women have received formal school education, formal education alone without corresponding changes in society's negative perceptions and attitudes towards women has not lifted the cultural, social and economic burdens that women bear. In a world where three-year-old "men" are accorded more human recognition and dignity than 30-year-old women, in the name of culture and tradition, IFENDU seeks to educate all to dismantle unjust cultural and other structures that undermine women's full human status. IFENDU works to promote women's full participation in all spheres of life on a basis of equal partnership with men.

2. IFENDU affirms the pivotal role of education in empowering women and the whole society. Since 2004, through training workshops and publications we have been creating awareness on the quality of women's life and raising questions as to what happens to women after graduating from college. For instance: Into what kind of social, economic and cultural climate do the female beneficiaries of our educational system return after graduation? Is their quality of life any different socially, culturally and economically from that of other women who have not attended school? Are they shielded from cultural/traditional discriminations which the society metes out against women? Unfortunately, there have not been many positive responses to these questions.

3. The print and electronic media reinforce gender stereotypes, which define who or what a good woman is; as do the entertainment and advertisement industries coupled with strong negative messages about women from the pulpit. Visual messages from the media include: "women stay home and are seen welcoming men back from work". Yet, this image does not correspond to the reality of many in family life in our context. Most Nigerian women are actively engaged outside the home; if not in wage employment, in farm work, trading under the hot sun. Many are the major income earners. Furthermore, career women in top managerial positions are often negatively portrayed in movies as bad women. Similar messages often issued from the pulpit include "a woman who does not cook for her husband is a bad woman". These messages have the combined effect of subliminally suppressing women who have the ambition to take on high-level jobs, even where spousal support is guaranteed. These considerations are relevant to the theme of the fifty-fifth session of enhancing women and girls' access and participation in education, training, science and technology, including the promotion of women's equal access to full employment and decent work. This is with the recognition of role models. The fate or outcome of the women trailblazers either encourage or discourage other women and girls to aim higher.

4. IFENDU affirms the observation in the report on the 2010 online discussion on gender, education and employment that women's educational attainment does not necessarily translate into improved employment opportunities. This is the case not

* Issued without formal editing.

only with women resident in their own countries but also women migrants, for instance African women in the diaspora. There are cases of women who hold higher degrees obtained from their host countries but could only find social service jobs unrelated to what they studied. Such experiences send out messages contradictory to efforts to enhance women and girls' access and participation in education, training, science and technology, including for the promotion of women's equal access to full employment and decent work.

5. In addition, there are current practices in some hiring companies which resort to giving short-term contract jobs, downsizing, laying off staff, and moving to areas/countries with cheaper labour, lower or no taxes. Such practices have increased with the trend of globalization, throwing more and more families into deeper poverty. Women and children are the worst hit in these scenarios.

6. In light of these observations, IFENDU recommends as follows:

In addition to very good programmes being initiated by many national Governments to enhance women's well-being and status, that Governments and corporations be required to report on what they have done or are doing to:

- Regulate or curtail representations of women in the entertainment and advertisement industries as well as print and electronic media which reinforce gender stereotypes, which have limiting effects on women's advancement (for instance as criterion for retaining or withdrawing their licence to operate).
- Educate leaders of religious communities towards more gender-sensitive preaching.
- Promote men's participation in childcare and domestic work in order to free women more to engage in educational and employment opportunities.
- Ensure that big and small enterprises alike implement anti-discrimination laws related to recruitment, pregnancy, salary and promotion (for instance through government subsidies, with criteria and conditions attached for retaining or losing their licence to operate).